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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000519

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/EX
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/12/2013
TAGS: PREL PBTS MOPS PHSA AU ER DJ
SUBJECT: FRENCH AMB TO DJIBOUTI ON RECENT EVENTS

REF: DJIBOUTI 518 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Chargee d'Affaires Kathleen List for reasons 1.4 b, d.

¶1. (C) CDA met with French Ambassador to Djibouti Phillippe Decherf on June 12 to discuss the French response to fighting in the northeast of Djibouti between the Eritrean and Djiboutian militaries. The Ambassador said the Djiboutians had approached his government, requesting various kinds of military assistance. On June 1, the French four-star, General Pugat, number two in the French military structure, visited Djibouti and returned to Paris. He recommended the GOF accept the Djiboutian request. The agreement in principle reached the Djiboutian government about the time that fighting broke out on the border with Eritrea. French military assistance plans shifted and on June 11, the French sent a company of men (100 strong) and heavy armaments (tanks, cannon) to Moulhoule, where the Djiboutian military is headquartered in the north. They will also provide tents and various supplies. The mission is to conduct joint border patrols with the Djiboutian military. The French have also begun a once-daily overflight of the area, as "the Djiboutians fear an air attack on the capital city." He stated that the French patrol boat Mistral will be in Djiboutian waters in a couple days, en route from the Myanmar crisis to France. The ship is not configured for military purposes, but rather NEO operations and will be followed by a light military ship to help patrol the shoreline in the north.

¶2. (C) When asked why there was no press about these developments, the Ambassador said it was all "part of the game - we are family, the Djiboutians and the French." Part of the game, he observed, is for the Djiboutians to always find the French guilty of some thing. While Djibouti needs French power, it does not want to have to recognize it. He mused that it was strange that the only country providing troops and materiel, the one that was actually doing something for the Djiboutian government, was the one criticized. He observed that the Djiboutian deployment of 1,000 troops was precipitous and scuttled the beginnings of mediation undertaken by the international community. Could the Djiboutian military really afford the loss of 1,000 men, he questioned.

¶3. (C) Decherf said that the question that arose in the international community after the French issued a statement on June 11 drew on an old problem of demarcation of the frontier between the two countries. The French Somaliland and Ethiopian border was very precisely defined by milestones up to Dattato in the past. From Dattato, however, to the tip of the disputed area, there has never been an internationally agreed-upon border, no milestones, no commissions. The Ambassador was impressed with the USG statement's language identifying the fighting in the "vicinity of the border,"

obviating the border discussion and focusing on the aggression. Had the French known about the shelling of Djiboutian positions on June 11, its statement would have been more forceful, condemning the Eritrean government for its actions.

¶4. (C) As the Ambassador accompanied the CDA to her vehicle, he asked if the U.S. Embassy had taken any new steps in its security assessment, as he was meeting with French citizens in the afternoon. CDA noted the following:

- Warden letter to AMCITs suggesting no travel beyond Obock at this time,
- Newspaper/radio advertisements for AMCITs to register at the Consular Section (particular interest, AMCIT children of Djiboutian parents who have never been registered),
- Cancellation of some non-essential trips up-country,
- Increased RSO patrols in the capital to allow notification to staff of crowds and alternative routes to and from work, and
- Recommended heightened staff alertness because of increased refugee flows to the capital and reduced income, due to increase in the prices of food and oil.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: After a seeming remoteness on the Ambassador's part in the past three meetings with the CDA, today he was effusive and informative, no doubt because Paris had made a decision on the Djiboutian request for assistance.

The capital appears noticeably more calm, officials more relaxed, due to international diplomatic support. There has been no reported fighting today. A front page photo of President Guelleh in La Nation with the caption quoting him - "If Eritrea is looking for trouble, it will find it," is

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largely seen as propaganda, dismissed as an attempt to stir patriotic fervor in the Djiboutian people, but not really serious. Despite its 18-hour distance by road from Djibouti, it has been a serious affair with serious consequences, most as yet unseen. END COMMENT.

LIST